

The Message of Buddhism

- Its Origin, and Its Relevance and Acceptability

Today

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General Introduction

This is the year 2001 and we are believed to have commenced the third millennium. You and I know that Buddhism had its origin very much earlier than the commencement of the millennia, at least by five hundred years or more. Space-wise, by the dawn of the so-called first millennium, Buddhism had spread far from its homeland in the central Gangetic basin in Magadha to western Asia as far as the shores of the Caspian sea. Archaeological remains such as monuments in stone of Middle Eastern regions like Afghanistan, some of them preserved *in situ* as in Bamiyan and others safely lodged in museums like Muse Guimet in Paris and those in Allahabad in Pakistan testify to this.

It is no secret that even more than three decades ago Buddhist scholarship in Japan was willing to trace the historical beginnings of Buddhism to Shakyamuni Buddha of India. In more recent years, this line of thinking came to be shared also by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the head of the school of Vajrayāna or Tibetan Buddhism. Evidence of a very healthy unity of purpose and a clear uniformity of practice by way of moral development and consequent mind-culture heading in the direction of wisdom, is now being witnessed everywhere in the Buddhist world.

This consequent unification of the three major divisions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna which is taking place today leads to the conclusion and conviction that the Buddhist world, in its totality, is more than large enough not to need any conversions into its fold. They only seek to deliver the goods. They

seek no electoral victory. This in brief has been the story or the history of Buddhism in the world for well over two millennia.

If you met young Siddhartha, i.e. the Buddha aspirant in India, more than twenty-five centuries ago, you would in a way have marvelled at the richness of both the religious as well as the scientific thought of the day he had inherited from his own native genius. The Indian view of the universe was not that far behind that of the modern physicists, even like Stephen Hawking of Cambridge and Paul Davies of Australia. The Indians knew of vast universes and solar systems which were going through the process of evolving. Not of a created earth and a sun and moon above it. Humans here, and possibly in other planets and in other similar systems, they believed, were as much the product of evolution, to come into existence as well as to totally disappear from those places from time to time.

Young Siddhartha, through a further segment of higher spiritual development which he acquired through his own striving and which led to his becoming the All-Knowing Buddha or Sammā-sambuddha, gained greater vision both about the humans and the planes of existence in which they were, both terrestrial and extra-terrestrial. The uniqueness of the contribution of Siddhartha to human kind, while he was yet unenlightened and not a Buddha still, lies in the direction of his thinking about the human predicament, about their true and real psycho-physical nature and their relative worth. This analytical approach [and not the mere make-believe attitude] to problems which humans had to face and had to find solutions for, made the Buddha a unique social scientist of the day.

Origin of Buddhism

Siddhartha was not born into this world to convey from elsewhere a divine message to mankind. He was no messenger of God. Such concepts were completely outside his range of thinking. While he was yet a young man in the household, he had an apparently built-in keener vision, a greater sensitivity, a vision built in through maturing in previous existences, to observe more precisely

than others and also to assess more accurately and more rewardingly the life-changes like birth, decay, disease and death which the humans were going through and which were unmistakably devastating, physically and mentally. This is the concept of ***dukkha*** or unsatisfactoriness of life in the world as realistically portrayed in Buddhism. The Buddha-aspirant then felt compelled within to look for an ultimate way out of it. And it had to be outside this cyclical continuance of life called ***samsāra***. This is what led him to the discovery of **Nirvana**.

But few among humans would sense it and realize it as such. Being in the midst of it, humans are naturally desensitized about it. At the same time, the Buddha-aspirant realized that it was the humans themselves who should become aware of this plight of theirs and strive to bring about an end of it themselves. On becoming the Buddha, he clarified his position as being only an indicator of the way to liberation from this painful process. A concept of a savior, personally external to the humans themselves, is categorically denied. He denied the existence of any power besides humans who could do it for them.

Each one becoming aware of the need to do this is accurately named in Buddhism as the fore-stalling of the vision and choice of Nirvana. Thereafter one works towards its achievement, possibly here and now, within this very life time. Relative to the degree of success achieved, the process might have to be pursued and continued in one or more lives hereafter. The potential of liberation, call it **Nirvana**, **Bodhi** or **Moksa**, or by whatever name one likes, is within every one. It is this very vital **shift of accent** from **grace or divine favour from outside**, in the process of salvation seeking, **to human endeavour and enterprise from within**, which earns for Buddhism the unique honour of **being anthropocentric**.

The methodology and the perspective of the Buddhist Salvation process

Humans are looked upon in Buddhism as the most qualified to start out on the process of salvation-seeking. In terms of the well developed intelligence and intellectual capabilities with which the humans are gifted, well above other grades

of life, they are viewed as being best qualified to undertake the process of spiritual elevation in the direction of Nirvana which is ultimately polarized against the normally clay-footed human existence. Humans are down to earth and world-oriented, in a plane of existence where unsatisfactoriness or *dukkha* exists. Nirvana is transcendental and beyond such existence.

Buddhism recognizes many grades of life in the universe, besides the humans. There is the visible animal world around us, believed to be not so developed like the humans. So is the reptilian and the mammalian within it. Buddhism also believes in extra-terrestrial life, though not adequately detected and discovered by us right now. So do the leading physicists in the world today, like Stephen Hawking and Paul Davies to whom we have already referred. The motivation of these extra-terrestrial beings for salvation-seeking is considered questionable.

Hence Buddhism concerns itself with the known and visible world of humans. Seeing no external element [believed to be divine or spiritual] within humans, besides the totality of their psycho-physical components, the Buddha lays the responsibility for the present qualitative assessment of humans, for criminalities or saintliness, of men, women and children, on each one. [This does not necessarily deny the impact of society on human life.]. But forget not this **anthropocentric stress**, both for the distress of humans and for their release therefrom.

Accepting a theory of transmigratory continuance through time and space, and an accompanying development or deterioration therein, extending over an infinite number of lives, the quality of human life today, specially the psychic, could possibly be in part the product of the present life style, acquired here and now or a good part of it may equally well have been inherited from many lives of the past.

Herein lies the Buddhist insistence **for the humans to take their present human life seriously, each one by himself and herself**, and start on their spiritual

ventures without a moment's delay, from the earliest opportunity in life. **Collective religious activities**, in terms of personal spiritual development, **are to be judged and assessed from this angle.**

Towards a Society that Loves, Shares and Cares

This position of anthropocentrism is a very basic and realistic foundation of religious and spiritual life in Buddhism. We use both words religious and spiritual in the sense of **adequate discipline to regulate the lives of humans here and now in this very existence**, from birth to death, in order **to generate and provide greater smoothness and harmony in the relationships among all living things in the world**, including both humans and animals. It is our conviction that no meaningful religion in the world today, with any tinge of spirituality within it, can afford to ignore this dimension of thinking. A great many social scientists are now turning in this direction. We know that most political creeds at world level, on account of their political philosophies, do think differently and have had to do so.

As far as Buddhists are concerned, **this spirit of universal love [*mettā*]**, overriding all divisive considerations of religiousness, ethnicity and political ideologies, is essentially basic. The greatest human discipline is needed here to develop this fundamentally **Divine Quality** or **Brahma-vihāra** [consisting of a totality of four virtues of love - *mettā*, compassion - *karuṇā*, appreciative joy - *muditā*, and equanimity - *upekkhā*]. In order to reach the goal of Nirvana, each Saṃsāric being has to completely eradicate his inherent **human weakness of ego-stressing** in terms of **I and mine**, i.e. in terms of ethnicity, religion or political ideology. This soon renders itself aggressive and devastating, both at personal and at global levels, as we witness in the world to-day.

Religiousness in Buddhism encompasses this entire area of indiscriminated love. We maintain that any violence, in any form, to this spirit of respect for all life does damage the pursuit of our religious ideals. We also firmly believe that a cooperative universal respect for life alone can be the only real basis for reduction and elimination of violence in the world, thus including wars, both

global and regional. Herein lies Buddhism's total campaign for universal love or *mettā* [Skt. *maitrī*]. It is more than a coincidence that the future Buddha who is to appear in the world at some time later, on whom most worldlings hinge their salvation, is named *Metteyya* or *Maitreya* = **Universal Love** [**Miroku Bosatsu** of the Japanese].

With a new sense of sanity that seems to be now emerging in the world today, more in the world of philosophers and psychologists, **ideas of physical and mental discipline, healthier notions of love and compassion, and respectful attitudes among humans** seem to be appearing on the horizon. Is it not both amazing and delightful to discover that the **3 R's** in the field of education we were once tutored in during the greater part of the last century as **Reading, (W)riting and (A)rithmetic** [as mere three school subjects] are now being meaningfully replaced with life qualities like **Respect, Responsibility and Readiness to learn?** This is what is being started and is being done in the U.S.A.

These are items of Buddhist education [or learning or culture = *sikkhā*] which were upheld as basic requirements from the very outset. [Note Respect = *gāraṇa*, Readiness to learn = *sussūsa* in Buddhist usage.]. They are necessarily the wisdom-output of humanity. We believe that these new patterns of thinking, now show themselves up in the world today, both as an outcome of the experience we are going through and also as an answer to the crying needs of the day, to remedy and counteract the very trying situations we are compelled to face daily. Through his psycho-ethical analyses of human problems like greed and hatred, the Buddha offered them to the world more than twenty-five centuries ago. Now it is being proved daily, and all over the world, that they are the answers for all times.

Further areas of human discipline and personal restraint which humanity is now being admonished to adopt in the English speaking world, particularly of the west, show remarkable affinity to early Buddhist thinking of Shakyamuni Buddha of India of the sixth century B.C. A few observations, picked up at random from western writers, would illustrate the issue. A theme which is rapidly gaining

ground in the western hemisphere, particularly in the education of children, is one entitled **delay gratification**.

To us Buddhists, this strikes a very familiar note. The word **gratify** immediately implies responding to sensory stimuli from the world outside. Our sense faculties like the eye and the ear pick up data from the world outside. Or to put it more generously, sensory stimuli continually do one of two things, they either attract or repel and the humans, uninstructed as they are, continue to react, **quite unmindful of the consequences**. It has become the most natural thing in the world today to call these stirrings **very natural processes**. And these labels have come to stay. But the **saner world today is challenging** these traditional hand-outs.

The psycho-analytical area of Buddhist ethics has worked very profoundly on this issue of sensory reaction. It advises and warns us that our human psychic make up consists, for the most part, of our reaction process to the world we live in. We are torn between attraction and repulsion. We are ourselves, in our day-to-day living, bundles of conflicting personalities [*anurodha-virodham āpapanno*]. That is why we are constant victims of stress and strain. Today, we are being advised more and more not to rush wildly in our sensory reaction to the world, but to act with caution and judgement. In Buddhism, we call this **being guarded in sensory reaction** [*indriya-saṃvara* or *indriyesu gutta-dvāratā*].

Psychologists in the English speaking western world would call upon parents to guide their growing up children on these lines. This is how the so-called bogey of **teen-age stress** is to be averted. This is equally true of **juvenile delinquency**. Educational institutions are now being re-structured with similar ends in view. We have already referred to the restoration in educational institutions of concepts like **respect** and **responsibility**.

In the world today, more so in the eastern theatre, lamentably in many Asian regions, we most distinctively face and fight staggering problems, like or unlike Don Quixotes - fighting wind-mills of his own creation. We allow our homes,

societies, religious and political institutions to rot, decay and stink. By the time persons and parties are dragged into courts for legal action, the stench is unbearable and the damage irreparable. It is the top brass, both men and women who dare indulge so. We, most certainly need to retrieve our lost ancient values and enforce our own **Social Highway Codes**. The Buddha did it more than twenty-five centuries ago.

Yet another good example in the area of **self-restraint** comes to us from another grouping of thinkers we would choose to call philosopher-psychologists, from that vast country of America, once again, who would try to suggest that before we humans end up our necessarily limited life span on earth here, they should turn in the direction of self-improvement in conformity to accepted norms of propriety and decency. This, they aptly call **age-ing** and **sage-ing**. At any rate, they got their perspectives right. Self-improvement, acceptable enough by any standards, here or hereafter, must be achieved while one is still alive here and answerable. It cannot be a **posthumous acquittal** or **rewarding**. We should also add here, **while in active service**, and **very much prior to retirement**.

Religiously, philosophically and psychologically, as Buddhists we admit, this is a very high standard set. But make no mistake. Virtue build-up in Buddhism is by no means an old-age activity. Buddhism does not concede to that. Apprehending the reality of death, and the uncertainty of its arrival, this moment or the next, the Buddhist has to engage himself incessantly in the self-cleansing process, bit by bit every day. Note what the Dhammapada says at verse No.239.

In gradual order should a wise man, every moment of his life, cleanse himself of his own defilements, bit by bit, as a smith removes the dirt off a piece of silver on which he works.

Translated by the author.

The Dhammapada is equally vivid and eloquent about the perils of advancing old age, in the face of life-terminating death knocking at the door. See verses 235-8.

Now you stand like a tree in Autumn, with all its leaves about to fall off. Messengers of Death stand by you, awaiting orders [for your removal from here.]. You are now on the point of departure. You do not seem to possess any provisions for the journey. v.234

Translated by the author.

The passage of time from the Buddha up-to-date stretches over more than twenty-five centuries. But the realities of time do not seem to have basically changed very much. The motives and modes of behaviour of men, women and children are cast, more or less, in the same old moulds. Each one of them, either as individuals or as constituting groups, religious, political or ethnic, has been struggling, each to advance his or her self interests. We have already referred above to the concept of **gratification**.

It is the urge to satisfy the personal, individual or collective, desires of the humans at every turn. It shamelessly covers the widest range from food, clothing and shelter, involving all the time unacceptably low patterns as well as despicable fraud and deceit. In sex, it even descends to the lowest, unheard of animal-like sub-human behaviour. There is not a single day when news paper reports from the world over [we do not need to name any cities] do not highlight corrupt abuse of power by individuals, sometimes in the highest position in the State, who misappropriate public money for personal use, carry on unacceptable sex relations with all manner of persons etc. etc.

What we do in the world to-day has apparently changed only in terms of dimensions, the skills and efficiency of the modus operandi and the degree of success we achieve by way of results [particularly to go undetected for inexplicably long periods of time]. To every grade of change now evident, we arrogantly attach a higher grade of value, calling each exclusive area as more developed or more advanced. Dominating these price-mark labels at large group levels are arms strength or military power, affluence or monetary superiority, market domination by way of agricultural and industrial production, heavily

backed by one's own scientific and technological development. Individuals work on the gift of their own personal genius. But man, including the woman, seems not very different from Adam and Eve in the vicinity of the fruits of the Forbidden Tree. Man is still being tempted, with or without any proliferation of the forces of evil, of Mara or Satan. This need to detect and correct our own misdeeds should be the main area of research and necessary follow up activity for any group of men and women who have any concern for the future of humanity. Call this area of activity religion, if you will.

More than six or seven years ago there came the cry from more than ten thousand teen-age girls, and that from the U.S.A. once again, that **they are teen-age girls** and that **they do not need sex** and that **sex is worth waiting for**. This was publicized in Australian News papers in Sydney. Sure enough we did not give this message to the girls. Those girls certainly are teen-agers. They also know what comes in the wake of sex. It is probably in the very poorer provincial areas of Asian countries where girls are being continually fished for the sex trade that young girls even do not know about sex and the implications of sex.

But we are glad to note that humanity is coming of age and are beginning to understand the world in a more meaningful way. That is why these American girls, who are particularly multi-ethnic, can speak and do speak in this manner. And also why and how Australian teen-age girls stand outside abortion clinics and endeavour to dissuade those misguided and misinformed pregnant women from indulging in those criminal acts of abortions. That these things happen in the world, we know and have seen them ourselves. This is part of the world we live in.

Sex via prostitution appears to be and promises to provide instant and convenient gratification. And for a wide range of people too, both young and old, with cultivated appetites [unquestionably cultivated in the disastrously wrong directions]. It is indeed in the category of today's consumerism. It is perhaps one of the largest and most shameful trades in Asia. Attracting patrons from all over the world. **You have it for sale, therefore we buy.** And as much **You buy,**

therefore we have it for sale. It seems to serve and save both parties equally well. This was the trade cliché in the Marijuana sale from Marseilles to America, many years ago, before Columbia displaced Marseilles. It can be lucrative too, for some who need that extra cash in hand. And its side-effects are also equally well known. There is no turning of a deaf ear or blind eye.

Please do not endeavour to sweep under the carpet the following. **Aids** - even accidentally contracted through a blood transfusion, **HIV** and **STD**. An unexpected or unwanted pregnancy and a **consequent abortion**, recklessly committed. These are only few among many.

An adequate awareness of Buddhism and a willingness to abide by its down-to-earth humane philosophy, would prevent one from being led by the diverse world trends today to the commission of such bestial crimes.

And we are glad too that we are fortunate in the world today to meet a brotherhood and a sisterhood who spontaneously share our Buddhist views on these human problems. In this change, we see the greatest triumph of Buddhism. So we end up with our adoration:

Glory be to the **Buddha** who delivered to us his message of the Dhamma.

Glory be to the **Dhamma** which infallibly leads us to the goal of Nirvana.

Glory be to the **Sangha** who have testified to us the triumph of Nirvana.

